

Stop the Presses: Learner Generated Media Projects

By Paul Borg and Richard Humphries

The volume and variety of study materials available to English language instructors and students have never been so great. There are, of course, the myriad conventional textbooks, complete with sample dialogues, structured drills, and accompanying cassette tapes. These have been the mainstay of classroom teaching materials since the 1970s. But there has been an explosion in the last few years of technologically advanced educational resources such as CD-ROMs, DVDs, and web-based educational aids.

Many of these new teaching materials reflect a change from passive to more active approaches to teaching and learning. Indeed, the buzzword is “interactive.” However, even these teaching materials can entail an adherence to set formats predetermined by the authors. To ensure optimal learner participation, students should be able to choose not only how they respond to predetermined cues or questions in a textbook, but also the content of their study materials.

As numerous researchers (e.g., Breen 1984, Nunan 1995) have argued, students should play a central role in devising their learning plans. Our program, therefore, is one that eschews the traditional follow-the-coursebook scenario.

Description of program

The content of the program comprises the following two phases:

Phase 1: Student as Editor/Publisher—in which learners create their own course text, based upon selections of already-published materials. The outcome of this phase is a personalized, self-generated text.

Phase 2: Student as Author/Publisher—in which learners use a publication-house simulation to develop, organize, investigate, write, and lay out materials that they have created themselves. The outcome of this phase is a group-produced publication.

Both phases have been employed successfully in university-level, L2 language learning classrooms in Japan, in trials involving over 300 students. Each phase represented a major part of a semester’s work for classes that met on average two hours per week.

As the two phases appear to have a logical progression, they can run concurrently, or one phase can be run independently of the other. This progressive two-phase format seemed to work particularly well in our situation, because Japanese universities operate a two-semester academic year.

Phase 1: Student as Editor/Publisher

At the beginning of the semester, an orientation session was held at which students were given handouts (in language appropriate to their levels) explaining their tasks—namely, that each student was to construct his/her own text reflecting individual interests and/or preferences. The students were given the choice of producing either a current-affairs-based text or a guidebook/profile of a country or local region of their choice.

To construct their texts, the students needed notebooks with either blank or lined pages. Each week they had to choose articles from the available print media (newspapers, magazines, Internet news sources), based on a specific theme and of interest to them.

Initially, the instructor chose the themes, such as music, sports, foreign travel, notorious people, modern trends, styles, and so forth. Later the students were encouraged to make their own choices.

Students were then asked to do the following:

1. staple the article they had chosen to the left-hand side of a double-page spread in their notebooks;
2. on the right-hand page, list a specified number of words, phrases, and idioms used in the article, giving the definitions and identifying the part of speech (they could use a dictionary);
3. below that definition list, compose three new sentences, each containing a new lexical item from that list;
4. after the sentence list, write a short personal reaction to the article and/or a summary of the main points they believed the author was trying to make;
5. study the article and develop an opinion on some aspect of it to prepare for a class discussion;
6. write a short summary of the class discussion in the notebooks (either for homework or at the end of the lesson).

In the classroom, the small discussion groups were set for the whole semester in order to allow familiarity and confidence building. The students would take turns presenting their articles.

Because the emphasis was placed on the students, the role of the instructor was essentially a supporting one. By circulating among the group and sometimes joining in discussions, the instructor was able to monitor for linguistic or vocabulary difficulties and encourage students to decode the media discourse.

When teaching lower-level classes, we encouraged students to begin the discussion by asking each other the reasons for their choice of article. We also asked students to try to predict how a particular news story might develop.

By the end of the year, the students had produced media-related texts of their own. Each textbook featured articles reflecting their personal choices and interests.

Phase 2: Student as Author/Publisher

At the beginning of this phase, students were offered a choice as to what type of publication they wanted to produce in a group. They were to decide whether they wanted a newspaper, lifestyle-type magazine, guidebook, photo essay journal, or other type of publication.

Since in Phase 1 the students investigated media discourse as they developed their language skills, Phase 2 was designed to continue developing those skills, but in a more productive way. The learners had to create the media content through simulation, which is extremely useful, as Jones (1982) has observed. The language used and developed is cohesive and functional, extending beyond the subject matter, and motivation is usually high because the material is authentic.

Case study: Lifestyle magazine

Once the students had decided on the type of publication they wanted, the instructors set deadlines and outlined some basic parameters for organizing the publication. The publication procedure then became the students' responsibility; instructors served as monitors and resources.

The publication parameters and procedure were as follows:

First, the publication was to be divided into separate sections, with the themes left open to class decision.

Second, each section was to consist of a few articles related to the theme. Students assuming the role of reporters were given the option of working on articles individually, in pairs, or in a group. (See Appendix A for a sample table of contents.)

The learners selected an editorial panel which assumed responsibility for uniformity of length, style, and vocabulary within the sections. The panel approved story ideas and layout, proofread work, and settled organizational problems such as disputes, absences, and deadline difficulties. A publication committee was selected, responsible for publishing the finished products.

At the deadline, the students submitted their materials, which were organized as they wished, to the publication committee. The committee then did the typing, cutting and pasting because the school lacked adequate computer facilities at the time.

Copies of the finished publication were placed in the school library to allow other students to read it. This encouraged the "reporters" and "editors" to feel a sense of accomplishment.

Goals of the program

Enhancement of discourse competence

The program is thematically based. It provides students with an environment within which they can explore media and other discourse and the cultural values and biases that underlie them.

As Michael Canale (1983) states, one of the key components of communicative competence is “discourse competence,” that is, competence in combining grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified text in different genres. Discourse competence requires an awareness of how utterances are linked in a structural sense (cohesion) as well as in the relationship between different meanings in a text (coherence). In a more general sense, discourse competence also presupposes an ability to recognize the communicative purpose of a given genre. Indeed, if one has misunderstood the nature of the genre, communication will fail, irrespective of one’s linguistic ability. It follows, then, that students must understand the communicative purpose of a particular text type before they can make the leap from reader to author.

Phase 1 of the program uses the mass media as a structural framework and as a source for both content and ideas for project development. This focus on media resources was motivated by a realization that much of any society’s interests and concerns are mediated through a form of mass media discourse. Therefore, the achievement of some standard of “media literacy” is a useful goal. Potter (1998) defines media literacy as a continuum with four interrelated dimensions: cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and moral. He relates these dimensions to skills. For instance, cognitive skills enable readers to analyze news stories and identify important points and potential biases, while moral skills allow students to adopt personal moral stances with regard to the media content.

Achieving media literacy involves the processes of encoding and decoding. Indeed, Gunther Kress (1983) argues that any objective analysis of printed media text, for example, would provide simultaneously (1) a full syntactic/grammatical description of the text, and (2) a statement of ideology which guided the selection of the linguistic features and processes. He also suggests that drawing out the “ideology” consists of identifying features that express experiential meanings (the writer’s understanding of events), interpersonal meanings (the writer’s attitudes toward his work and the audience), and contextual meanings.

Thus, while seeking to ensure that learners are able to acquire vocabulary and master linguistic structures, teachers should strive to foster an environment in which learners are able, to some extent, to decode the cultural contexts that surround these words and structures.

Flexibility

One of the principal advantages of the program is that it is easily modified. It allows for a degree of refinement and elaboration by giving learners greater autonomy in theme selection, text and activity organization, and text layout. It also allows for variation in student ability. The program can be modified to suit different levels, and since many classroom situations involve multilevel learners, this was useful in our experience.

When implementing Phase 1 in basic level classes, the instructor might have students read their personal reactions to the articles they have chosen and respond to queries from other members of

their discussion groups. These members might be requesting clarification or further information, questioning the reliability of the source, or eliciting the presenter's opinion on any or all of the information in the article.

In higher-level classes, students were encouraged to expand their discussions and critiques of the media-based material. On several occasions, this led to general debates, comparisons between similar articles, or even arguments over different interpretations or impressions of the same article.

The program also was designed to be flexible with regard to the activity featured in the lessons. Although the end product is a written publication, the program sought to address all four language skill areas.

Learner-teacher negotiation

The program was designed to be learner centered. The curriculum was partly negotiated—that is, themes were introduced by the teacher but customized by the learners.

Giving the students a sense of achievement

The learners were proud to have created something this substantial on their own. The finished product was a permanent record reflecting their interests and opinions.

Practical ideas, suggestions, and

applications flowing from the program

Although we only focused on newspaper-type textual materials, the principle of student-generated materials could be extended to other types of language instruction texts. Indeed, at university level, the comparative ease and speed with which students can now gather diverse information might obviate the need for traditional language textbooks. Other student-produced learning materials include:

1) Country or cultural profiles

Using the interactive media, students could exchange information via Internet chat-lines, discussion groups, listserves, and so forth and compile their own materials based on information they have gathered. Also, the world wide web offers ample opportunities for students to collect country-specific information.

2) Journals or diaries

3) Travel guides or university catalogues.

Students could produce their own travel guides on the town, area, or country where they live, or develop a prospectus for their university. If the requisite imaging and layout software is available, students could photograph sights to achieve a polished, professional-looking product.

4) Common errors in English text

During the semester, each student could keep a compiled list of typical written errors. The entire class could rank the errors according to their importance and frequency, and provide examples of corrections for each error (Humphries 1996).

5) Skills text

With a more ambitious effort, an entire skills text could be constructed. (See Appendix B.)

Conclusion

Students responded very positively to simulations of the type outlined in this article, supporting the findings of Jones (1982). Being part of the media discourse process appeared to facilitate students' understanding of it. As one participant stated, "I really enjoyed making this magazine. This project was hard, but interesting for me."

As a starting point for our current-affairs-based media project, we wanted to get a feel for how much information students actually had about the world outside. To this end, we compiled a short questionnaire designed to reflect levels of awareness with regard to important names, events, and concepts. We found that, while there were obvious gaps in the students' knowledge, they were able to understand and categorize much of the information. This discovery suggested enough latent interest and comprehension to make media projects like these more than feasible.

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